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## February News from Welaka National Fish Hatchery



### Welaka Wildlife Fact

“Hooded” is something of an understatement for this extravagantly crested little duck. Adult males are a sight to behold, with sharp black-and-white patterns set off by chestnut flanks. Females get their own distinctive elegance from their cinnamon crest. Hooded Mergansers are fairly common on small ponds and rivers, where they dive for fish, crayfish, and other food, seizing it in their thin, serrated bills. They nest in tree cavities; the ducklings depart with a bold leap to the forest floor when only one day old. This and more information about Hooded Merganser can be found at: [https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Hooded\\_Merganser/id](https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Hooded_Merganser/id)

### Welaka National Fish Hatchery Prepares for Morone Season

Duck Season! No. Rabbit Season! No. It is Morone season!!! What is Morone Season you may ask? Morone is the genus name for temperate bass such as Striped Bass, White Bass and Yellow Bass. The primary fish species cultured and reared at Welaka NFH is the Striped Bass. Welaka NFH cultures two unique strains of Striped Bass, one that lives in the Atlantic Ocean and the other that lives in the Gulf of Mexico. Working through a Memorandum of Understanding, Welaka NFH obtains Atlantic Striped Bass fry from the state of South Carolina's Department of Natural Resources (DNR). These fry are placed in the hatchery ponds at Welaka and grown out to about an inch to an inch and a half when they are harvested from the ponds and stocked out in the St. Johns River. Once Welaka NFH reaches our requested stocking numbers, additional fish are returned to South Carolina where they are released in a dedicated water body of South Carolina DNR's choosing.

*(continued)*



*In order to be ready to fill ponds when fry are anticipated, Andy Jackson boards up the pond kettle. This will allow the Welaka team to start filling ponds once we know the Striped Bass are about ready to spawn, credit USFWS.*



## Welaka National Fish Hatchery Prepares for Morone Season

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The production of Gulf of Mexico Striped Bass is a collaborated effort between Welaka NFH, Panama City Fish and Wildlife Conservation Office, Warm Springs Regional Fisheries Center, Private John Allen NFH, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, Georgia Department of Natural Resources, and Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources. Members of this group work together as the Apalachicola – Chattahoochee – Flint (ACF) Morone Workgroup. This group meets annually in a workshop format to discuss what worked the previous year; what can be improved on and to determine the stocking request per facility to reach the group's overall conservation goal for the coming year. This meeting was held February 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> at Lake Point State Park in Eufaula, Alabama.

*For calendar year 2017, the group agreed to produce nearly two million Phase I Gulf of Mexico Striped Bass.*

Of these two million Phase I Striped Bass, Welaka NFH has been asked to produce 300,000 of them. In addition to the Phase I fish, Welaka NFH was also asked to provide fry for 300,000 to 400,000 to Cordele Fish Hatchery in Cordele, Georgia.

In preparation to receive the first fry, the team at Welaka NFH will begin filling ponds on the Welaka Unit with St. Johns River water. Once these ponds are full, they will be fertilized to produce a zooplankton crop to feed the fry. At this time, the team will begin filling the ponds on the Beecher Unit from Beecher Springs. Zooplankton from the Welaka Unit Ponds will be collected and used to spike the Beecher Unit ponds to help jump start their zooplankton production. On average, it takes about four to five weeks for the Striped Bass to grow large enough to harvest and stock out. We will keep you informed on our production numbers and how well our ponds produced in the next couple of months.

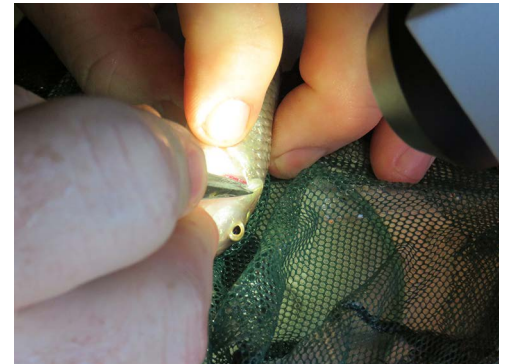


*Jonathan Wardell from Orangeburg NFH prepares infestation buckets to inoculate host fish with Carolina Heelsplitter; credit USFWS.*

## Season Three of Carolina Heelsplitter Mussel Now in Production

While it may sound like the newest TV reality show, the production of the Carolina Heelsplitter Mussels is really part of the successful recovery program for the most endangered species in the state of South Carolina. In 2013, meetings between the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources resulted in plans to develop a propagation program to begin producing Carolina Heelsplitter Mussels in efforts to begin to recover the species. Orangeburg National Fish Hatchery houses this recovery program, with assistance from South Carolina Ecological Services Office, Bears Bluff NFH, South Carolina DNR, and Welaka NFH. The Carolina Heelsplitter is known to occur in three river drainages in South Carolina. The first production season produced mussels from the Catawba River system. These mussels will be stocked out later this year after the third fish passage project is complete. The second season mussels were produced from the Pee Dee River System and still have a year of growth before they can be stocked out. The focus of this year's effort was on the Savannah River System, so that all drainages are represented in the recovery effort.

The irony was not lost on the team that we were attempting to make baby mussels during Valentines week.



*Host fish gills are examined to determine the level of inoculation; credit USFWS.*

A dedicated team from the offices mentioned above and the Sumter National Forest searched two of three selected streams in search of gravid female mussels. A band of heavy rain on the second day prevented the team from searching the third stream. The Savannah System has the smallest population of Carolina Heelsplitters resulting in only one female being found in three days of searching. A total of 65 fish were used as hosts to transform the larval mussels into free living animals that will be grown at the Orangeburg NFH before being eventually stocked out in the streams of the Savannah River system. Many hands make light work they say, but if it weren't for all the hands involved in this project, this recovery program would not be as successful as it is.... Thank you to everyone involved.